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Second Sight

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> The first grasshopper gave a jump in the neck of the bottle and went out into the water. He was sucked under the whirl by Nick's right leg and came to the surface a little way down stream. He floated rapidly, kicking. In a quick circle, breaking the smooth surface of the water, he disappeared. A trout had taken him.
>
> "Big Two-Hearted River," *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, p.175

> There was no choice at all. There was only the choice of streets to take you back fastest to where you worked.
>
> *A Moveable Feast*, p.76

Since the 1920's, generation after generation has been simultaneously delighted and horrified by Ernest Hemingway's writing. While the directly sensory, unembroidered qualities of his storytelling create beautiful images, their clarity also illuminates grotesque ones. These two characteristics give his work an almost perverse quality. But there is more to Hemingway's stories than mere clarity of vision. Beyond and beneath the images and yarn-spinning skill, like the landscape suggested by the scattered brushstrokes of an impressionistic painter, lies an animating worldview. It is here, in the deep pools beneath the surface, that the ugliness and beauty of life are reconciled. This reconciliation is born not of hope but of necessity. Abundant filth and unmitigated despair remain forever, but there is life within the abyss: there is nothing to grab to break the fall, but there is a kind of existence on the way down. Hemingway's characters are caught in a world, closely analogous to our own, where all efforts to avoid or even ameliorate suffering prove futile. Everyone goes through the worst of times no matter what he does. But there are those who can give the suffering a meaningful shape, who can by force of will create a domain where they have real power. That domain is rigidly limited, but within it there is an

autonomy available to the powerful. This autonomy is an aesthetic one. Heroes don't fare any better in the end than others, and they can't save themselves or anyone else, but they can create their own rules and win on their own terms, develop incantations that exorcise feelings of helplessness, and create beauty from the chaos they live in.

But though this power is potent, Hemingway's more obvious mission is to articulate the much more potent outside forces that strip men of their usual powers. The sense of despair that his work tends to create results from his systematic assault on all that we normally hold sacred and turn to in times of need. If he creates a realm where man can have real power and make choices that matter, he first convinces us that any other power we thought we might have is a pleasant illusion. "Love," "God," "honour," "comradeship" and other catchwords denoting the absolute are emasculated, and we are powerless to maintain them.

This sense of powerlessness is perhaps the most evident theme in the short stories. The characters in, for example, *In Our Time*, are almost invariably found in situations where they are reduced to undignified, abject helplessness. We are told in the collection's interchapters of the stinking mess Sam Cardinella makes as he is publicly hanged (Ch. XV), of Nick Adams pleading, under fire in a trench in Italy, for salvation by the only power he thinks is left and unrepentantly forsaking it when safety returns (Ch. VII), of him waiting, shot through the spine, for stretcher bearers while the battle continues (Ch. VI), and of Greek peasants in a line with "no end and beginning," "herded" by the cavalry away from their homes (Ch. II). Within the stories themselves, we see Harold Krebs, unable to talk to a girl, afraid of "consequences" ("Soldier's Home"). We see Nick Adams' father and mother in their separate bedrooms, Mr. Adams helplessly pumping the shells from a shotgun after having his bluff called in front of his son by Dick Boulton ("The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife"), and we

are told of Nick as a young child watching the blood drip from the sliced neck of the desperate husband in "Indian Camp." People are portrayed in situations they could not possibly have avoided, where mistakes really cannot make things worse and no strength of character is sufficient to make things better. The forces they are up against are inevitable, unstoppable, and blindly malevolent. Orders come from higher up, letters ending relationships come from across the sea, and the horrors of the past come to mind unbidden.

Despair and helplessness are not unique to the short stories. *The Sun Also Rises* begins with the words of The Preacher of Ecclesiastes, crying that "One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh," the same prophet who proclaimed that all human accomplishments are vanity and vain striving. We see representatives of the "lost generation," Brett and Mike, and are made painfully aware of the vanity of their destructive nihilism, of the fear behind their endless drunks and short-lived romantic trysts. More powerfully, we see the failure and vanity of Jake Barnes' attempted sacraments. He seems to be better off than Brett and Mike in some ways, but beneath the surface he tends to grasp desperately at atonement for something. Baptism does not help him in San Sebastian. In a pointed passage immediately following the bleak parting of ways that occurred after the fiasco of San Fermin, he dives, away from a boy and girl obviously in love, into the clean dark water, swimming to the bottom of the bay, but the raft where they are chatting makes a "dark shadow" even there (235). The Lord's Supper does not help him in Madrid. No amount of bread and wine—three cocktails, five bottles of rioja alta, and a huge dinner with dessert—can atone for anything! "Oh Jake," Brett says, "we could have had such a damned good time together," but all Jake can say is "Yes . . . Isn't it pretty to think so" (243-247).

In *A Farewell to Arms*, a tentative solution to this powerlessness, romantic love, is explored but does not hold up. The time that the lovers, Patrick

Henry and Catherine Barkely, spend together seems to provide a refuge for them. They are able to be together in a hospital, a hotel, and a mountain retreat in a neutral country—all places where the fighting and death cannot seem to reach. The division between love on the one hand and war on the other is strengthened by heavily coded imagery. Carlos Baker has suggested the opposition of the two poles of "home" and "not-home" (Baker, 47) as a kind of Manichean good/evil dichotomy. This dialectical tension seems plausible: the mountains versus the plains, snow versus the rain, the sacred versus the profane, love versus war. More specific oppositions add to the plausibility. Gorizia, where the war is being fought, and where men are wounded and killed, is obviously the antithesis of the hospital in Milan; the retreat with soldiers and whores from the Isonzo seems deliberately juxtaposed to the lovers' escape to Montreux. These carefully crafted poles seem to point to a comfort zone, a nest in the mountains above war and death. Baker maintains that this imagery forms the basis of a moral infrastructure for the novel (105). A careful reading, however, reveals that the home pole is little better than the not-home one and that the nastiness that Baker sees in the plains is everywhere. We realize that such purity does not exist for Hemingway when we read the passage in which Frederick Henry muses that "Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage or hallow were obscene beside the names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates." Nothing remains pure. The sacred, for instance, is sacred only in defeat. "How would Our Lord have been if Peter had rescued him in the Garden?" asks Henry (178). The price of Salvation is His passion and death. War rages through the mountain ranges between Italy and Austria, oblivious to Baker's image distinctions. In a more obvious destruction of the home icon, Henry and his soldiers invade homes to steal food. One of the homes they encounter is described in just the way that Baker thinks is reserved for barracks and whorehouses:

> Crossing the field, I did not know but that someone would fire on us from the trees near the farmhouse or from the farmhouse itself. I walked toward it, seeing very clearly. The balcony of the second floor merged into the barn and there was hay coming out between the columns. The courtyard was of stone blocks and all the trees were dripping with the rain. (215)

Rain, danger, and disorder surround the home. The war has invaded it. While Baker is right in insisting that the two poles have been deliberately developed, the home pole is not an unsullied sanctuary. Whatever it may have been, it too is deflowered by the war. Even romantic love wears out long before the stillbirth the novel ends with. At the races, before Henry is returned to active duty, while he claims to have been very much in love, he and Catherine wander away from their friends to be alone. But the older Frederick who is the narrator comments dryly on the characters: "After we had been alone awhile we were glad to see the others again" (132). Love, which many have mistakenly seen the book as deifying, frustrates him even in their mountain retreat, where, unwilling to go skiing with other men or do anything besides dote on the very pregnant Catherine, he grows a beard in a half-hearted attempt to maintain his masculinity (298). Without the accoutrements of manliness and virility—a gun and a uniform, both of which he loses on his return to Catherine—he must grasp at appearances. And rain comes even to the mountains, driving them to the valley and to the hospital where Catherine is to die.

This same darkness and despair appear in all Hemingway's works. In *To Have and Have Not*, Harry Morgan, despite his cojones and resourcefulness, loses first his livelihood and then his life to forces greater than he (The Great Depression, the Cuban revolution). In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, El Sordo is killed not because he makes mistakes, not even because his enemy is more powerful than he is, but because he has the bad luck to make a raid just before it snows. In *Across the River and Into the Trees*, Colonel Cantwell doesn't die of stupidity or because he constantly picks fights, but of natural causes: he dies of a heart

attack. Life is like the swamp Nick Adams wants so much to avoid in "Big Two-Hearted River": bare banks, deep water, unseen currents and overhanging branches that get in the way when you cast. Fishing there is tragic and so is life.

But in "Big Two-Hearted River" (and in life) there is a place where men can make their own rules. No one is powerful enough to bend others to his will, and no one is untouched by the nameless, impersonal and indifferently destructive forces of nature. But some people can filter the information their sensory organs send them, and they can order the images their memory delivers, all by force of will. Nick Adams has a very specific set of rules by which he conducts his trip: he must make camp before he eats, he must eat before he fishes, and he must not touch the fish out of water. There is even a proper way to make the coffee. Only after having strictly adhered to this protocol could he happily think that "He was in his home where he had made it" (167). He cannot do anything about his troubled upbringing or his war wounds or about the way they keep bubbling to the surface when anything unexpected happens, but he can do what he does the 'right' way and for a while keep himself from cracking. It is in these small ways, in strictly adhering to unspoken rules of conduct, in being humane to others under inhumane conditions, that a man can act instead of react. Thus we see the old patron in "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" portrayed sympathetically, not because he is a successful or happy man, but only because he maintains his dignity. He has nowhere to go and he always gets drunk, but he dresses neatly, always pays for his drinks—and tips—and he never spills them. Parts of the world are always salvageable to those who reach into this realm. The Harry of "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" maintains that "no thing could hurt him if he did not care" (53). We have to care about the right things and stoically accept the dirtiness and pain of the real world. Thus we see Jack Brennan, the boxer of "Fifty Grand," unable to make himself younger or even to get into shape, deliver a tough performance and grit his teeth long enough to return a low blow for a

low blow, go the distance, and win the money he could win only by staying on his feet until the fight is over. Instead of complaining about the crookedness of the sport, he ignored all else and made sure he satisfied himself. Similarly, we see Manuel Garcia of "The Undefeated" following the rules and style of the bullring long after the fight should be over, being horribly injured, and thus earning the right to keep his matador's ponytail. The way things are done is more important than the results they bring. An aesthetic right and wrong replace all previous idols.

The healing effects of this kind of power are more explicitly developed in *The Sun Also Rises*. Jake is a man of considerable physical appetite but of an even more enormous aesthetic appetite. He, like the other members of the inner circle of the novel, possesses a keen eye for beauty. Manifestations of this perceptiveness are everywhere. Early in the book, Count Mippipopoulos, a man Jake the narrator portrays sympathetically despite his involvement with Brett (contrast the treatment Mike and Robert receive), insists that the champagne he has bought must not be used for toasts: "'This wine is too good for toast-drinking, my dear. You don't want to mix emotions up with a wine like that. You lose the taste'" (59). This kind of reverence for beauty separates the "lost" from the "not-lost." On the trip from Bayonne to San Fermin, we see that this perceptiveness is one of the criteria for admission into the inner circle: Bill and Jake have it while Robert Cohn doesn't.

> After a while we came out of the mountains, and there were trees along both sides of the road, and a stream and ripe fields of grain, and the road went on, very white and straight ahead, and then lifted to a little rise, and off on the left was a hill with an old castle, with buildings close around it and a field of grain going right up to the walls and shifting in the wind. I was up in front with the driver and I turned around. Robert Cohn was asleep, but Bill looked and nodded his head. (93)

It is only to those with this kind of perception that the term aficionado is given. Only an aficionado can truly appreciate the fresh beauty and bravery of Pedro

Romero, the bull-fighting "hero." The killing of the bull is only a necessary denouement to a rigidly defined and glorious performance. A good bull-fighter has a sense of how to do things well and neatly. And it is this attention to proficiency and skill, respect for beauty and grace—knowledge of the way things should be done—that forms order from chaos. As Jake taught Brett about the art of bullfighting, he commented that "it became more something that was going on with a definite end, and less of a spectacle with unexplained horrors" (167). As it is in the ring so it is with life itself. The proficiency of the picadors and the skill of the matadors combine to project beauty in a world where matadors are killed and horses gored. Thus Jake, the man mutilated by a war beyond his control, unable to consummate a romance, carefully wraps his comb in his towel and his fish in ferns, living a richer and more rewarding, if no less tragic, life than the physically unharmed wastrels with whom he consorts.

This attention to the right way to do things vitalizes the fatalism of *A Farewell to Arms*. The only right that remains is to get the job done properly, and the only wrong is to fail to. What people have to do is to do the right thing when they could have done otherwise. The inner circle of *The Sun Also Rises* is replaced here by a natural aristocracy of those who are good at what they do. Rinaldi, Jake's roommate, is certainly no better in his actions than Brett: he is usually drunk, always hopeless, and profane. But because he is an excellent doctor, he deserves a title while Lady Brett Ashley does not. More explicit portrayals of this natural aristocracy can be found. Referring to the doctor who wants to wait six months before he operates, Henry says, "If he was any good he would be made a major" (98). The doctor who eventually operates on him is good, and he is a major. The aging Count Greffi can still win at billiards. The barman at the hotel in Milan is laudable not so much because he helps Henry escape as because he is a good barman: he can find things out, he is courteous, and he provides good service (244-6). The waiter in the restaurant outside the hospital in Switzerland,

on the other hand, spills drinks (315) and refuses to serve what his patron wants (318).

Scattered throughout Hemingway's other works are countless other examples of this aesthetic code. The hunter's code of *Green Hills of Africa* insists not that the hunter be nice to his wife or sportsmanlike with his hunting partner, but only that he kill cleanly (148). To be able to do so, he must (obviously) be a good marksman. If he is, it doesn't matter whether or not he treats his helpers horribly. Harry Morgan is a very good fisherman, even if he isn't a very nice guy. Colonel Cantwell is a very good shot and he certainly didn't get to be a general by being a lousy soldier. He has an awful temper, however. All these characters are able to appropriate part of the world by creating rules in the void or by following implicit, unspoken ones. Their physical powerlessness is coupled with an aesthetic ability to seize the world they live in. This kind of gesture is aptly described in *A Moveable Feast*. Seeing a beautiful girl in a cafe, without touching her, talking to her, or even making eye contact with her, Hemingway can say: "I've seen you beauty, and you belong to me now, whoever you are waiting for and if I never see you again, I thought. You belong to me and all Paris belongs to me and I belong to this notebook and this pencil" (6). We can in this way enter a world where the fact that we may have to break mules' legs and shove them into shallow water to drown ("On the Quai at Smyrna") cannot touch us. The fact that the Republic had to begin with a drunken slaughter (*For Whom the Bell Tolls*, 103) and the fact that "poor boys who [do] not want to die, [will] share the contents of a match box full of gonorrheal pus to produce the infection that [will] keep them from the next murderous frontal attack" (*Across the River*, 59) remain, but their power is only physical. The second sight of the aficionado of beauty does not alleviate pain and suffering at all. His natural sight continues to deliver images of the messiness of the world. Rotten, filthy, and horrifying things will still happen because the world is a

rotten, filthy, and horrible place. Frederick Henry's words strike true when he says:

> If people bring so much courage to this world, the world has to kill them to break them, so of course it kills them. The world breaks every one and afterward many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry (249).

Yet Robert Jordan's words also strike true: "But nobody owned his mind, nor his faculties for seeing and hearing, and if he were going to form judgments he would form them afterwards" (136). We can't protect those we love or even our own bodies, but we can keep our own counsel. We must with resolve and endurance move through the filth and muck, walking, as the patron of "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" does, "unsteadily but with dignity" (290). If we do, we can create and defend, as living artists, a small realm where the ugliness that is allowed to enter is powerless against the beauty that lives there.

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